

Today's second reading, from St Paul's Letter to the Romans, is about the unknowability of God. Several centuries later, in North Africa, St Augustine said the same thing in his own way, almost summarizing St Paul: *Si comprehendis, non est Deus* – if you understand it, it's not God. Even later still, the greatest of the medieval theologians, Thomas Aquinas, wrote:

“God is greater than all we can say, greater than all that we can know; and not merely does he transcend our language and our knowledge, but he is beyond the comprehension of every mind whatsoever, even of angelic minds, and beyond the being of every substance.”

There is a whole theology here, known as *apophatic*, which means trying to describe God in terms of what he is not. Many of the great Christian mystics have written about the essential unknowability of God. It has even made it into modern existential cinema.

In Ingmar Bergman's classic 1957 film *The Seventh Seal*, the Knight says to Death, who has come to claim him:

“I want knowledge. Not belief. Not surmise. But knowledge. I want God to put out His hand, show His face, speak to me.”

I guess we all feel like that sometimes. Maybe even a lot of the time. But that's never how God is encountered, not with sure and certain knowledge. And because we can't ever know God as he is, we create our own personal and private images, which will all be, to one degree or another,

projections of something within ourselves. In one way this doesn't really matter, except if the image we have of God is judging or harsh or punishing or vindictive – because God is none of those things. Because of this, the mystics always questioned who we conceive of, when we conceive of God. A more contemporary mystic has said:

“Whatever comes into our minds when we think about God, is the most important thing about us.”

Not being able to know God should not make us doubt his existence – it should only make us question the image or concept that we have of him.

However, there is light at the end of this particularly dark tunnel – and it is a radiant one. We don't have to throw up our hands in despair or give up trying or wonder what the whole God thing could possibly mean anyway if we can't ever know him. In the first instance, we have to make a very important distinction: we must distinguish between *knowing about* and *knowing*, because they are definitely not the same thing. Knowing *about* something means acquired knowledge: for instance, through reading newspapers or books and articles, and watching the news and hearing him speak, I know *about* Donald Trump – but this knowledge is completely derivative and has been obtained without any personal contact with him. I know *about* him, but I don't *know* him, because this second kind of knowledge is in relationship. I know my brother in this way. The other evening as I sat at the kitchen table my mobile phone rang: it

was Tony, phoning by satellite connection from the middle of the Pacific, on his way towards Fiji; I could even hear his sails flapping in the wind. After overcoming my sense of awe and incredulity that I could speak to someone on a boat in the Pacific from my kitchen in Saffron Walden on a device smaller than my hand, I then surrendered to the happiness of the moment: hearing his voice, knowing he was safe and well, the warmth of human contact across many thousands of miles. It was a very joyful experience – even when he complained that I never answer the phone quickly enough. Now, I would not have felt any of this if my brother was someone I only know *about*; however, my knowledge of him is in relationship, it is not derivative or acquired.

So it is with God and each one of us. We can never have knowledge *about* him, because he transcends all our capacity to comprehend; but we certainly can *know* him in relationship. When St Paul wrote in his letter to the Romans: “Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How inscrutable are his judgments and how unsearchable his ways!” he was referring to knowing *about* God, acquired knowledge, not knowledge in relationship. We can be sure that he experienced the second kind of knowing – and very powerfully so – because in his second letter to the Corinthians, he writes:

"I know a person in Christ who, fourteen years ago, was swept up into the third heaven—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows. And I know that such

a person—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows—was caught up into Paradise and heard things that are not to be told, that no mortal is permitted to repeat.”

St Paul is talking about himself, of course. He is describing an experience of what knowing God in relationship can mean.

And so, even though we may not be swept up into the third heaven; and even though acquired knowledge *about* God is impossible for us, we *can* know him in relationship; and the nature of that relationship is love. These are the only two things that truly matter in our relationship with God in this world: love and loving kindness – from him to us and to him from us through others. It is a symbiotic relationship.

This doesn't happen in a vacuum. For us, above all, it happens through the Person of Jesus Christ, because for us he is the surest and safest way to know God in relationship. The cross is the perfect symbol for this: the vertical arm is our relationship with God in Christ and the horizontal arm is our relationship with others in Christ – or perhaps it would be nearer the truth to say our relationship *with* Christ *in* others. At the centre of the cross, where the two arms intersect, is the heart of Christ, the source of all love in this life. This is where the heart belongs, because although it is the head that acquires knowledge *about*, it is the heart that experiences knowledge in relationship; our heart is the instrument and

vessel by which we know God, not our mind; and when the heart truly *knows*, the mind can have nothing to say.

In *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, Milan Kundera wrote:

“When the heart speaks, the mind finds it indecent to object.”

The importance of the heart in knowing and loving God cannot be over-emphasised. This is the spiritual heart, not the organ of muscle and blood. It denotes the very centre of ourselves, that sacred inner space where God and us meet. A contemporary mystic has said:

“The spiritual heart is what fills the emptiness with radiance and allows us to see this life as it really is: not other than the plenitude of God’s Being, in which all beings subsist.”

And this heart is connected to all others, despite the illusion of separation that the ego maintains.

The Persian Sufi mystic Jalal Rumi wrote:

“God writes spiritual mysteries on our hearts. They are waiting silently for us to read them.”

What these poets and mystics are saying far more eloquently than I ever could, is this: the spiritual heart, the centre of ourselves where we meet God, is the key to knowing God – and others – in relationship. We only have to turn it.

If we want knowledge *about* anyone or anything else, we can go onto Google.

